

Collier schools' attorney discusses association with League of the South

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Richard Withers isn't against public education — honest.

Collier County schools' first full-time attorney will start working next month, but he's already having to explain certain past associations.

Withers once belonged to a group called the League of the South, which has been accused of veiled racism and anti-public education stances.

The attorney comes from Jacksonville, where he worked for Nassau County schools. In 2001, local NAACP officials learned of Withers' League membership and asked for his resignation from the district.

Instead, Withers gave up his group membership.

The issue never came up during background checks of Withers, said Allun Hamblett, Collier's director of human resources.

"I always ask: 'Is there anything that would pose students at risk or embarrass the school district?'" Hamblett said of Withers' references. "There was nothing."

Withers said he joined the group at the urging of former Nassau County School Board Chairman Jim Lear, who was the local League's president.

There was a Civil War site called Camp Finnegan, Withers said, that he wanted the League to buy before developers.

"That's the reason I got involved," Withers said. "That was the enticement, the land deal. ... They're a little further out there than I am."

On Sept. 10, 2001, Withers told the Jacksonville Times-Union newspaper he joined the group only because Lear told him it wanted to improve the image of Southerners.

"I had made some comment about a derogatory TV program that made us all look like toothless, trailer-dwelling, pickup truck-driving, Rebel flag-waving race car fans," Withers is quoted in the article. "He (Lear) said it was a relatively new organization, that it was not the (Ku Klux) Klan and it stood for a positive portrayal of Southern culture and lifestyle, and that sounded pretty good to me."

Still, the Southern Poverty Law Center, a leading national watchdog, listed the League as a hate group that translated Ku Klux Klan rhetoric into more palatable language.

Withers, 57, insists nothing about race was mentioned during the three or four meetings he attended. He explained he often employed minority interns in his law offices and that many of his family members are in public education.

"It was a bunch of older, retired men," Withers said. "When I felt they weren't serious about the land deal, then I became less interested."

Withers is moving from Jacksonville to Naples to become the district's full-time attorney.

Last June, the board voted to hire its own full-time attorney after a volunteer team recommended the district reorganize its legal services.

Withers will oversee the district's new legal department, which costs some \$1 million a year.

Withers has 32 years of experience in litigation in areas such as real estate, contracts and ordinances.

He starts July 1 and will be paid \$135,000 a year.

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